DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 186 897 CS 205 526

AUTHOR Fahnestock, Jeanne; Secor, Marie
TITLE Invention in Argument.
PUB DATE Mar 80
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference on College Composition and Communication (31st, Washington, DC, March 13-15, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Critical Thinking; Decision Making; *Discourse Analysis; Higher Education; *Logical Thinking; *Persuasive Discourse; Problem Solving; *Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

A genre approach to teaching the argumentative essay in composition classes has been developed. The need for this approach emanated from problems associated with the other methods of teaching persuasive discourse, such as the logical/analytic, content/problem solving, and rhetorical/generative approaches. The genre approach depends on the identification of four types of propositions: categorical propositions, causal statements, evaluations, and proposals. Practice in identifying and writing arguments for these statements provides a structure for learning that avoids extensive and unnecessary diversions into inductive and deductive logic, while keeping to the principles of sound reasoning. The teaching method progresses from simple, basic units (the categorical propositions) to the complex combined types (proposals), giving students structures they can fill with any kind of content. This classification of arguments into types can also be turned into a method of analyzing argumentative discourse. (RL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Jeanne Fahnestock
Marie Secor
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED186897

Invention in Argument

by

Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor

The climax of many composition courses is the argumentative essay, the last, longest and most difficult assignment. An effective written argument requires all the expository skills the students have learned, and even more, asks for a voice of authority and certainty that is often quite new to them. Aware of the difficulty and importance of argument, many composition programs are devoting more time to it, even an entire second course. At Penn State, for example, the second of our required composition courses is devoted entirely to written argument, out of our conviction that written argument both brings together all other writing skills and prepares students for the kinds of writing tasks demanded in college courses and careers.

We know what we want our students to do by the end of our second course: write a clear, orderly, convincing argument which shows respect for evidence, builds in refutation, and accommodates its audience. The question is, how do we get them to do it? The composition teacher setting up a course in argument has three basic approaches to choose from: the logical/analytic, the content/problem-solving, and the rhetorical/generative. All of these approaches teach the student something about argument, but each is problem ridden.

The teacher who uses the first approach, the logical/analytic, in effect takes the logic book and its terminology into the classroom and

CS205526

introduces students to the square of opposition, the syllogisms categorical and hypothetical, the enthymeme, the fallacies, induction, and deduction. Although we all ought to know logic the way we all know how to drive, it is difficult for both composition teacher and student to control the subject matter. And a composition course is, after all, a writing course not a logic course, nor should it become a pale imitation of what the philosophy department can do so much better.

A more serious objection to an overload of logic is that little of it can be demonstrated to carry over into written argument. Formal logic, as Chaim Perelman and David Hackett Fisher have pointed out, is simply not the same as the logic of discourse; students who become adept at minipulating fact statements in and out of syllogisms and Venn diagrams still may not have any idea how to construct a written argument on their own.

Another supposed borrowing from logic, frequently brought into the composition classroom, is the distinction between induction and deduction as forms of reasoning and therefore distinct forms of argument. Induction and deduction are sometimes seen to be as different as up and down, induction reaching a generalization from particulars and deduction affirming a particular from a generalization. We certainly cannot blame logicians for such an oversimplification. The exact distinction between these two is a matter of much controversy. Irving M. Copi in his Introduction to Logic (4th edition, pp. 23-26) departs from the distinction between the two as complementary kinds of reasoning, defining it instead as the difference between certain (deductive) and probably (inductive). And Karl Popper in Conjectures and Refutations (pp. 46-47) obliterates the distinction by showing that induction, as traditionally defined, does not exist:

But in fact the belief that we can start with pure observations alone, without anything in the nature of a theory, is absurd; as may be illustrated by the story of the man who dedicated his life to natural science, wrote down everything he could observe, and bequeathed his priceless collection of observations to the Royal Society to be used as inductive evidence. This story should show us that though beetles may profitably be collected, observations may not.

.....

Observation is always selective. It needs a chosen object, a definite task, an interest, a point of view, a problem. And its description presupposes a descriptive language, with property words; it presupposes similarity and classification, which in its turn presupposes interests, points of view, and prbblems.

According to Popper, the observations that supposedly lead to a generalization are, in fact, controlled by a prior generalization. There is no such thing as a pure form of reason which goes example plus example equals conclusion. Therefore the student who thinks that his mind is working in two different directions, inductive forward and deductive reverse, is seriously misled. In fact, there is only one method of reasoning in written argument: it is an application of the formalities of deduction to matters of probability. This view of induction and deduction is not a quibble over definition; it has consequences for the student's writing, as we will show later.

Philosophers and rhetoricians are of course aware of the difference between formal logic and the logic of written argument. Stephen Toulmin in The Uses of Argument and, more recently, Stephen Thomas and Howard Kahane have written accessible books examining reasoning in "natural language." Thomas's analytical approach in Practical Reasoning in Natural Language is of value to both writers and readers of written argument. He keeps logic's most useful construct, the distinction between premise and conclusion, and uses it as a probe for the structural elements of written argument. Kahane's approach in Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric is analytic in a different way, saying in effect not what the logic of written argument

is, but what it is not. Continuing the tradition that began with Bentham, he shows fallacies at work in political rhetoric. Yet valuable as these analytic approaches are, neither of them provides a heuristic for the invention of written argument. Once again, the student who is a whiz at detecting both the structure and flaws of someone else's argument is not necessarily capable of generating a convincing argument of his own.

Another continually attractive approach to teaching argument in the composition classroom is the content/problem-solving approach. The assumption behind this approach is that students will absorb the principles and methods of written argument by simply doing it and doing it and doing it. In a content-based course, which may use a case book or a group of related readings or even the lectures and readings of another course, the instructor may not even define the writing as argument. Instead, students write papers with "theses" which grow naturally out of their readings or are suggested by the instructor. Another variety of this approach is the problem-solving method, as in Cases for Composition, which frames assignments not only by limiting topics but also by defining rhetorical situations. Students in this kind of course write their way out of problems; in short, they argue in letters, memos, reports, and brief articles.

These approaches are effective because they approximate real-life writing situations, which supply both purpose and content. Moreover, a course that teaches writing this way is attractive because the instructor has a body of content to present and discuss; if such a course works well, invention is not a problem because students are directly stimulated by the content, and they do practice writing arguments.

But such courses raise a serious question: what do students learn that can be transferred to other writing situations when their instructor is no longer suggesting topics nor the controlled reading stimulating invention? What, in short, do students carry away from a course in which the subject matter of rhetoric has been replaced by discussions of sociology, psychology, or even philosophy? If we are not experts in logic, neither are we experts on all the subjects students write about, and a composition course which spends most class time discussing the Book of Job or Studs Terkel's Working is not spending enough time discussing writing.

The composition course which eschews content must teach invention; therefore the composition course devoted to argument is now in some trouble. Two of the most famous modern schemes of invention, Burke's pentad and Young, Becker and Pike's tagmemics, are not directly applicable for argument. They are ways of finding things to say, but not ways of generating premises for arguments, and learning them in preparation for writing arguments is like learning wheat genetics in preparation for baking bread.

Of more direct value in argument are the classical sources: definition, comparison, cause and effect, and authority. These classical sources do help students invent premises for the proposals and evaluations they usually come up with when left on their own to generate theses for arguments. But they are of less help when we ask students to take one step further back and support the premises the sources have generated. And, since many arguments are simply matters of definition or claims that particular causes operated, the classical sources are not a complete tool

for invention in argument.

Nevertheless, it is possible to give students more specific aid in inventing arguments, if we begin by distinguishing the basic types of arguments and the structures characteristic of each. We derived this approach when confronted by the variety of propositions students volunteered as subjects for argument. After collecting scores of these, we found they could be sorted into four main groups: Propositions answering the question, 1."What is this thing?" 2. "What caused it or what effects does it have?" 3. "Is it good or bad?" and 4. "What should be done about it?" Propositions which answer these questions are, respectively, categorical propositions, causal statements, evaluations, and proposals. The thesis of any argument falls into one of these categories. The first two, which correspond to the classical sources of definition and cause and effect, demand their own forms of argument with distinctive structures. Arguments for the third and fourth, evaluations and proposals, combine the other two.

Any statement about the nature of things fixed in some moment of time can be cast as what logicians call a categorical proposition, a sentence which places its subject in the category of its predicate. The pure form of a CP is

Subject	Linking Verb		Predicate
All art	is		an illusion.
Caligula	was		a spoiled brat.
Ballet dancers	are	really	athletes.

(However, statements about the nature of things do not always come in such neat packages, but even a proposition without a linking verb, like "Some dinosaurs cared for their young," is still a CP which could be recast into pure form, "Some dinosaurs were caring parents.")

Whenever a CP is the thesis of an argument, it makes certain structural demands. Since supporting a CP is always a matter of showing that the subject belongs in the category of or has the attributes of the predicate, that predicate must be defined whenever its meaning cannot be assumed and details or examples given to link it up with the subject. Suppose a student is writing a brief argument supporting the proposition, "My roommate is generous." His instinct will be simply to give examples of his roommate's generosity: the lending of money, clothes, shampoo, and time. He can go right to examples because the definition of "generous" is assumable. But the student should realize that a definition of "generous," whether or not articulated, controls the choice of examples. Because we tend to forget about such assumable definitions, we trick ourselves into thinking that the examples come first and lead inductively to the thesis.

In a more arguable CP, such as "America is a class society," the definition of the predicate cannot be assumed. It must be supplied; it must be plausible; and it must be so carefully constructed that whatever evidence the writer marshalls about the subject will fit that definition. In other words, the arguer for a CP works under two constraints: the definition of the predicate term must be acceptable to the audience, and the evidence or examples about the subject must be convincing and verifiable.

If our arguer defined "a class society" as one in which people live in different sized towns, he or she could produce plenty of evidence that Americans do indeed live in towns small, medium, and large, but "class society" has been defined in a completely unacceptable way. On the other extreme, the writer could define "class society" more acceptably as "a society structured into clearly defined ranks, from nobility to peasantry,"

but where could he or she find an American duke or serf? Obviously, the arguer must construct a plausible definition which fits real evidence.

Once the student understands that definition and specific evidence are the requirements of a CP argument, several structural options become available. The controlling definition can sit at the beginning of the argument, can emerge at the end, or its elements dispersed. In this last structural option, the definition of the predicate is broken down into components, each of which is supported with appropriate evidence. Take a proposition like"Wilkie Collins's Armadale is a sensation novel." The arguer for this proposition might specify a multi-part definition of "sensation novel" which would supply the whole structure of the paper: "a sensation novel is characterized by its ominous setting, grotesque characters, suspenseful plot, and concern with the occult." To generate the structure of an essay by dispersing the definition of a predicate is much more compelling advice than simply to tell the student, "develop your topic."

A second type of proposition needs quite a different kind of argument. An assertion of cause and effect adds the dimension of time and is therefore not supported with definition alone, but with another kind of ruling assumption, that of agency. Agency is a basic assumption about what can cause what; it is the smallest, the least residual link between cause and effect. Definition and agency, then, are the warrants (to borrow Stephen Toulmin's term) or the assumptions behind the two most basic kinds of arguments. If we make a claim about the nature of things (a CP), we rely on an assumption about the nature of things, a definition.

And if we make a claim about the causal relations of things, we rely on an assumption about what can cause what, that is, agency. For example, if I say that the cause of teen age violence is the violence on TV, the agency I assume, the smallest link between cause and effect, is imitation. Or to put it another way, if my enthymeme is "teenagers are violent largely because they see violence on TV," my missing premise is, "teenagers tend to imitate what they see on TV."

Since causal arguments depend on an assumption of agency, they are just as "deductive" as CP arguments. The problem of invention in causal argument is in thinking up possible causes of an event to begin with. Students tend to forget the complex interaction of factors, conditions, and influences that yield an effect. It is simplistic to emphasize one cause, without understanding how it works in connection with others. Students have to learn to think backwards along the paths of known causal agencies, and one way we can help them do this is by introducing them to the existing terminology of causality. Causes can be identified as necessary and sufficient, remote and proximate, as conditions or influences acted on by a precipitating cause. Some causes are even reciprocal; in human affairs we can speak of responsibility as a cause; and we can even speak of the absence of inhibiting factors as a cause. The student who has used this heuristic of causes to think out a network of causal connection can then, depending on audience and purpose, shape an effective causal argument.

Thinking up causes is one thing; convincing an audience that they operated is another. The writer of a causal argument has to use certain tactics to convince an audience that causes and effects are linked, and

there are several ways of doing this. When a remote or distant cause is being linked to an effect, the writer must knit a chain of causes from one to the other. Time precedence, analogy, and singling out examples in the case of a causal generalization are other methods which can be invoked to support a causal argument. And we can also turn to John Stuart Mill's methods for discovering causes in the first place: the single difference, the common factor, concomitant variation, and elimination. To rehearse that process by which a cause was discovered can be convincing in argument.

Lacking a heuristic for invention in causal argument, teachers of writing have tended to ignore it as its own kind. Actually, causal argument is one of the most complex and yet common kinds of argument, and there is much more to teach than a passing reference to the dangers of the post hoc fallacy.

The CP and the causal are the two basic kinds of arguments. Once students learn how to construct these simple types, they can combine them into more complex arguments, supporting evaluations or proposals. An evaluation of any object, practical or aesthetic, is really just a CP. To support a thesis like "Jane Eyre is a great novel," the writer constructs or implies a plausible definition of "great novel" which fits the evidence from the book. But the evaluation of an action, an event, or a decision may require a causal argument as well. We judge an action or a decision wrong if it has bad consequences, and we may have to trace those consequences in a causal argument. For example, if we want to argue that it was wrong to bring the Shah to the U.S. for medical treatment, we could support that thesis by exploring the consequences of that decision. And, of course, we can still use a CP to support the

evaluation of an action. We could argue that it was right to bring the Shah in by classifying the decision as a humanitarian one.

Similarly, a proposal, an argument that some action should be taken, can be supported with a combination of smaller CP and causal arguments. We show that a problem exists (CP), that it has bad consequences (causal), that it is ethically wrong (CP), that our recommended action will have good consequences (causal), that it is ethically right (CP), and that the conditions necessary to carry out the proposal either exist or can be brought into being.

The genre approach to argument we have just outlined makes it possible to teach argument coherently, while avoiding some of the pitfalls of existing approaches. This approach avoids extensive and unnecessary diversions into logic while keeping to the principles of sound reasoning. And this overall method of teaching argument, from simple, basic units to complex combined types, gives the student transferable structures which can be filled with any content, yet are not so automatic as to preclude thinking. This classification of arguments into types can also be turned into a method of analysis for any piece of argumentative discourse, while it remains a useful scheme of invention for the teaching of argument.